

Bureau of Labor Statistics Data Provide More Complete Count of Young Farmers

The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) estimates the number of people employed in farming. These data provide a less dire picture of the rising age of farmers than does the census of agriculture, which does not provide personal data on junior partners and unpaid family members. Nevertheless, the BLS data show a steady decline in the number of young farmers during the 1990's.

There is concern over the age of farmers—specifically concern that the average age is rising and the number of young people entering the occupation is falling. The issue is not a new one. Since the 1950's, USDA has received letters from farmers who were alarmed by the decline in the number of farms, a visible rise in average age of farmers, and the apparent shortage of young new farmers. Young people were going off to “public work,” they said, using a common expression of the time.

The most common source of information on the number and age of farmers has long been the census of agriculture, taken every 5 years. The data by age go back to 1890. They are very useful, but are limited in that they consistently understate the number of younger farmers, and thus overstate the average age of all farmers.

This problem stems from the fact that the census form obtains only personal characteristics (such as age) for one person from each farm or ranch. In the case of partnerships, such information is obtained only for the “senior partner or person in charge.” Thus, in a typical parent/offspring partnership, age would be recorded only for the older adult. With 9 percent of all farms being partnerships and another 4 percent being small family corporations, the potential for undercount of young farmers is clear.

BLS Survey Counts Junior Partners

An alternative data source is that collected for the Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) by the Census Bureau, as part of its monthly national survey of employment. This survey is based on a sample of 47,000 households. Each employed person's occupation is obtained and, thus, junior partner farmers are included as well as senior partners. The BLS data differ from the census of agriculture in one other respect: persons with more than one job are tabulated by the occupation at which they spent the most time in the survey week. Therefore, persons for whom farming is secondary work are excluded from those tabulations. (People with second jobs are identified, but data on those jobs by occupation and age of worker are not available.) This can be viewed as a limitation of the data, but it does mean that the results represent people who have their main work reliance on farming. In contrast, the overall census of agriculture numbers include many thousands of people with minimal attachment to farming, given the very liberal farm definition used in the census. (A place is regarded as a farm if \$1,000 or more of products were sold from it in the past year, or if it is deemed capable of selling such an amount.)

Surge of Young Farmers During 1970's Reversed During 1980's

The BLS series shown in table 1 begins in 1970. At that time, nearly 50 percent more farmers were aged 65 years and over than under 35 (fig. 1). The age trend, however, was steadily downward throughout the 1970's, as substantial numbers of young people entered the business and many older ones retired. This was a time when the large supply of “baby boom” children was coming of age, when there was a strong back-to-the-countryside movement, and when there were some years of excellent farm profits and rising farmland values. The number of farmers under age 35 rose from 248,000 in 1970 to 374,000 in 1982, by which time the relative prevalence of young and old farmers had been reversed, with the young ones two-thirds more numerous than the older ones.

The farm financial crisis in the early and mid-1980's was the worst since the 1930's. The most dramatic trend evident in the data after 1984 is the decline in the number of very young farmers, those under 25. From 1976 through 1984, their numbers were very stable, never below 96,000 or above 102,000. (The census of agriculture number for the same age group was 67,000 in 1978 and 62,000 in 1982.) Thereafter, the BLS figure for farmers under 25 fell steadily to just 41,000 in 1993, a drop of three-fifths. Part of this decline

Agriculture and the Rural Economy

Table 1

Number of farm operators and managers by age group, 1970-98

Annual Bureau of Labor Statistics estimates show demographic trends in employment of farm operators and managers

Year	Total	Age group								Median age
		<20	20-24	25-34	35-44	45-54	55-59	60-64	65-older	
Thousands										Years
1970	1,753	14	43	191	281	414	219	229	364	53.4
1971	1,666	14	50	190	266	389	220	205	332	53.0
1972	1,688	16	57	191	275	386	218	225	321	52.9
1973	1,664	17	60	184	266	392	218	222	301	52.8
1974	1,643	21	69	196	262	391	215	194	295	52.0
1975	1,593	22	71	223	259	380	201	176	261	50.8
1976	1,514	18	79	218	242	361	189	155	251	50.5
1977	1,459	15	83	217	238	317	198	145	247	50.6
1978	1,480	18	83	231	247	305	183	162	251	50.3
1979	1,446	18	83	246	238	307	169	169	216	49.5
1980	1,485	20	78	245	260	313	176	174	218	49.5
1981	1,485	21	81	252	266	298	181	163	223	49.1
1982	1,452	18	82	274	256	280	163	158	221	48.4
1983	1,450	17	79	277	274	276	159	155	213	47.8
1984	1,442	19	81	274	272	281	158	154	202	47.7
1985	1,359	15	62	256	262	272	154	151	186	48.1
1986	1,337	12	55	255	250	258	151	140	216	48.7
1987	1,317	11	53	242	252	252	142	153	213	49.0
1988	1,286	14	47	234	259	244	150	122	215	48.6
1989	1,269	16	41	236	269	231	132	136	206	48.1
1990	1,211	14	40	229	262	221	117	125	203	47.7
1991	1,228	11	42	210	285	233	130	140	178	47.8
1992	1,215	10	43	187	272	235	124	136	207	49.0
1993	1,156	9	32	184	270	225	119	114	203	48.7
1994*	1,453	44	43	199	320	302	265**	**	279	49.0
1995*	1,446	46	35	191	341	288	140	124	281	48.8
1996*	1,314	10	28	178	309	275	128	118	267	49.8
1997*	1,317	15	31	173	304	273	139	126	255	50.0
1998*	1,187	11	25	147	270	277	126	115	216	50.1

Note: Data are annual averages of monthly statistics, based on number of persons whose sole or principal occupation (measured by time worked) was farm operator or farm manager.

*Data for 1994 and later years are not comparable with prior years due to use of 1990 census of population controls and changed procedures that yielded many more operators, especially female spouses and teenagers.

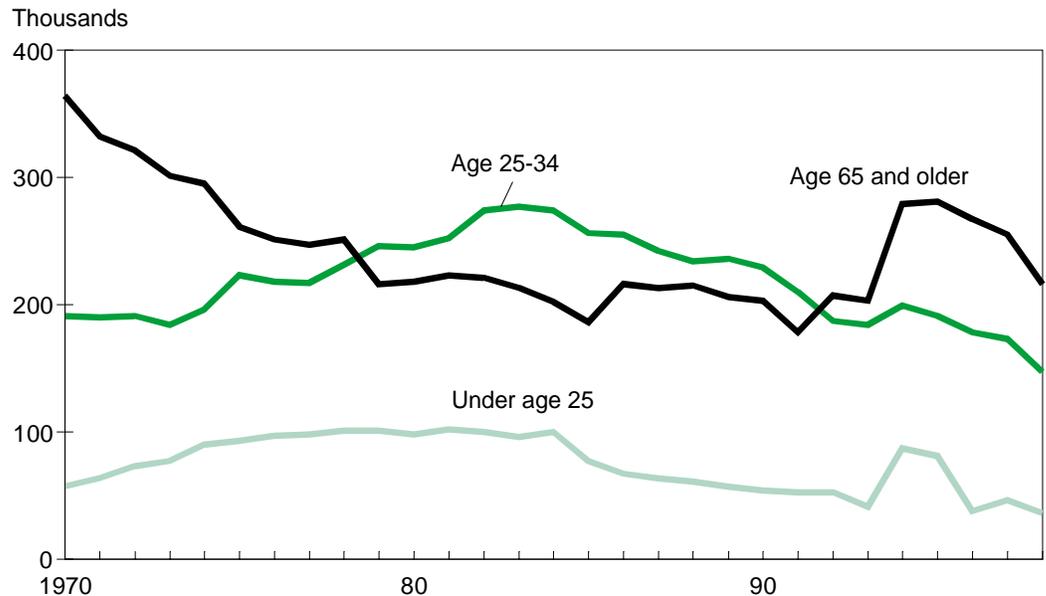
**In 1994, data were reported only for 55-59 and 60-64 age groups combined.

Source: ERS analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics data.

Figure 1

Farmers in selected age groups, 1970-98

The number of farmers in both young and older age groups has fallen since 1994



Note: Chart shows number of people who were primarily employed as farmers or farm managers estimated from sample surveys. Estimates increased in 1994 due to a change in interview procedure that counted more female and teen-aged farm operators.

Source: ERS analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics data.

probably stemmed from the reduced potential supply of young farmers as the smaller birth groups that followed the baby boom came of age. But it seems likely that it also reflects a reduced willingness to enter farming by young people who grew up during the stressful times of the farm crisis.

In 1994, the BLS changed its interviewing procedures in a manner that elicited a larger count of unpaid family workers. This change produced a higher number of female and teenaged farm operators. But from that time to 1998, the number of operators under 25 fell by more than half again from its revised level of 88,000 in 1994 to 36,000 in 1998.

Farmers 25-34 peaked in the early 1980's, but have since fallen in number as the "boomers" have either entered middle age, withdrawn from farming, or shifted primarily to off-farm work. As a group, farmers under 35 comprised 26 percent of all farmers from 1982-84. But as a result of disproportionate declines in both the under 25 and 25-34 groups, those under 35 were just 15 percent of total farmers by 1998. Clearly, farmers must sense a comparative shortage of young colleagues, given this degree and rapidity of change.

On the other hand, farmers under 35 comprised just 14 percent of total farmers in 1970 under the earlier procedures, a slightly smaller representation than today. And the 15 percent found in the BLS survey of persons whose sole or principal job is farming is fully double the 7 percent under age 35 measured by the census of agriculture for farmers it counts as having farming as their principal occupation. This latter group in the census is heavily weighted with persons age 65 and over, many of whom are retired and do not regard themselves as in the labor force any longer.

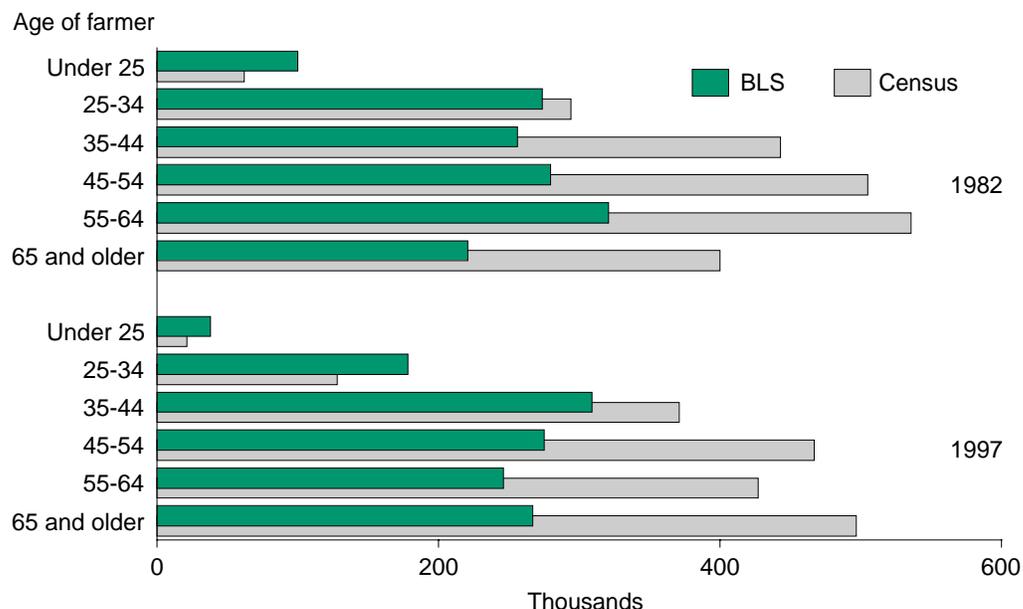
Census of Agriculture Undercounts Young Farmers

In absolute numbers, BLS found 219,000 farm operators and managers under age 35 in 1997 whose sole or principal work was farm operation, whereas the census reports 149,000, including those who just work part-time (fig. 2). Thus, the BLS data more fully

Figure 2

Comparison of BLS and census of agriculture counts of farmers by age group, 1982 and 1997

The census counts fewer young operators and more older operators



Note: BLS denotes estimated number of farmers and farm managers based on principal occupation. The census counts only the senior partner or person in charge for each farm operation.

Source: ERS analysis of Bureau of Labor Statistics and census of agriculture data.

convey both the proportion and absolute number of farmers who are young. Two points seem equally important to stress. The supply picture for young farmers is not as dire as the census data would imply if uncritically interpreted without knowledge of census procedures concerning data for partners and family corporations. That being said, the BLS data show a rapid drop in young farmers in the last decade, at a pace well above that attributable to the passing of the baby boomers into middle age.

The median age of farmers in the BLS series in 1998 was 50.3 years (the age separating the farmers into two equal groups). This is not a record high value, being below that of most of the 1970's. The median has, however, risen in each year since 1995 and is certain to be pulled considerably higher as the bulk of the large baby boom cohort (now in its 40's and late 30's) moves into the over-50 age group. [Calvin Beale, 202-694-5416, cbeale@ers.usda.gov]